

AMERICAN bicyclist

Fall 2006
www.bikeleague.org

League of American Bicyclists

Working for a Bicycle-Friendly America

GETTING A PROFESSIONAL BIKE FIT

JUST GET ON WITH IT:
On the Tour d'Afrique
from Cairo to Cape Town

UNBRIDLED BICYCLIST:
Seeing America
at 10 mph



League of
American
Bicyclists

JUST GET ON WITH IT

On the Tour d'Afrique from Cairo to Cape Town



“There is an old African proverb that asks, ‘How do you eat an elephant?’. The answer is ‘one bite at a time’.”

Henry Gold, founder of Tour d'Afrique



Ethiopia — local kids love to run with the bikes.

Photo by Didier Pijlmeborg

By Todd McDonald

In November of 2005, I was hired to be the mechanic for a four-month bike race from Cairo, Egypt to Cape Town, South Africa. I only had seven weeks to prepare from the date I accepted the job until the start of the race. During these weeks, in between inoculations, packing, and repacking, I said goodbye to my wife (temporarily), my job, and my dogs. The weeks flew by, and soon I was on the flight to Cairo. It was ridiculously long, and I arrived in the middle of the night.

I met the group for the first time on January 13 at a five-star hotel — the last of these we would see for the duration of the trip. I was immediately struck by the wide range of participants. The riders ranged from young to old, fit to fat, and serious to casual. The founder of the tour set the right tone for the trip. He reminded us not to be intimidated by the mileage of the trip, and to just focus on the day in front of us.

At the meeting, I was introduced as the mechanic. My work began almost immediately after that, as a rider approached me with a bike that had been damaged in transit. My first wrenching experience on the trip turned out to be auspicious — to straighten a bent rim; I had to beat it on the ground. Wrenching on Tour d'Afrique was about working with what I had and fixing things on the fly. In the U.S., I probably would have recommended a new wheel, but in Cairo, I just started beating the rim on the ground. That wheel took him all the way to Cape Town.

Riding Strategies

By January 15, all the bikes had been assembled and we gathered in front of the Sphinx to begin the journey. Going into the trip, I wasn't sure how much riding I would be able to do. From the minute I arrived, the leadership encouraged me to ride as much as I was able while still completing my duties. I rode sweep across Cairo, but found out that this strategy wouldn't work for the entire trip. Staying behind the riders who were on the trip to relish the scenery rather than ride quickly left me too far from the racers who needed my assistance. For the rest of the trip I started the day at the back and worked my way up.

The first few days of riding were flat, and we had a fantastic tailwind. The riding was so enjoyable and easy that we started to relax. Around this time was when the group coined our slogan: "Just get on with it." We used that phrase liberally throughout the trip to remind us to deal with what was happening right then — what was right in front of us. It was a useful phrase as the riding, and the wrenching, got tougher.

Meeting Locals

Sudan was fantastic. Surprising. Eye-opening. Challenging. It was one of the highlights of the entire summer. And yet the first thing I think of when I think of Sudan is crummy roads. Most of them

weren't even roads, just tracks in the sand where 4x4s have crossed from one village to the next. The hardship of Sudan also brought more people together, because we were all suffering under the trying conditions of the road. We were also very surprised by how kind and welcoming the Sudanese were.

One night we camped just outside of a town, and a small group went back in to see what the town was like. We were drinking Cokes we bought at the local market and our Sudanese guide said, "Come here, we are going to have foul." [foul = beans] We walked into a bare room and sat on a mat. It turns out that it was someone's home — they

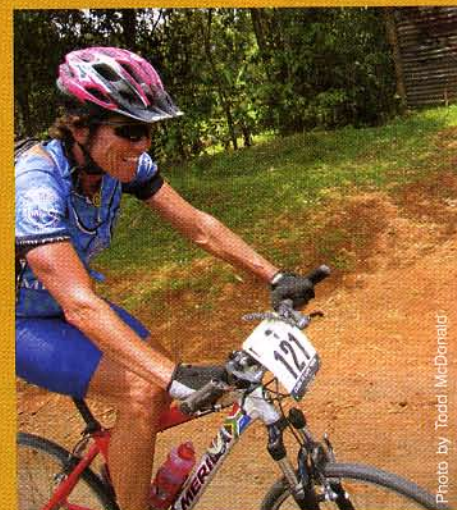


Photo by Todd McDonald

Joan Lauwrens, Women's 1st Place.



Photo by Rita van Rooyen

Giza: The start of the race.



TOUR D'AFRIQUE BY THE NUMBERS

Left: Todd wrenching in Africa.

- 11,900:** Distance, in kilometers, of the tour from Cairo to Cape Town.
- 55,000:** Amount of elevation gain, in meters, for the entire ride.
- 7,567:** Distance, in kilometers, that I rode. That's roughly the distance from New York to Los Angeles to Washington, D.C.
- 700:** A rough estimate of the repairs that I did. Most were minor, but some definitely not.
- 44:** Riders who did the entire trip.
- 23:** Record number of punctures in one day.
- 22:** Days in a row of some sort of rain through Tanzania, Malawi and Zambia.
- 15:** EFI riders who completed every freaking inch. (Halfway through the ride, they dubbed themselves Every Foolish Idiot.)
- 6:** Cracked frames from the rough terrain.
- 5:** Number of times I used a rock as a tool.
- 4:** Broken suspension forks.
- 4:** Rebuilt wheels.
- 3:** Number of times I vomited (from parasites, exertion and sun stroke).
- 1:** Hot showers from Cairo to Nairobi.



Phillipa LeRoux — still smiling after pushing her bike through the Sudan.



A local cyclist in Malawi.

wanted to welcome us to their town by sharing their food with us. They served us cold, spicy beans with bread and coffee, and they were fantastic.

Wrenching in Africa

To summarize: Being a tour mechanic in Africa isn't pretty. To illustrate: One day, one of our riders was having difficulty pedaling. As he pedaled, his cranks would seize up. To keep going he would pedal backwards to loosen them, and then they would seize up again. My tools were in the truck at the finish, and we were at the lunch stop. Because the rider didn't want to sag, and I wanted to help, I overhauled his bottom bracket with only a multi-tool, a screwdriver, and a large rock. Some highlights of this — ultimately successful — operation were banging out his cranks with a rock and prying off his dust shields with the screwdriver as I read the "DO NOT DISSASSEMBLE" statement printed above them.

Another challenge of both riding and working on the trip was being exhausted from the day's ride and still having to keep all of the bikes in great working order. Intellectually, I knew that I was on this fantastic ride as the mechanic. I also knew that I love to ride, and I wanted to ride as much as possible. Sometimes, these two goals collided.

One particularly hard day, I arrived at camp in Zambia after crossing the border from Malawi. It had been a beautiful ride with rolling hills, and I got to camp exhilarated and exhausted. Before doing anything else, I went to the bathroom. While I was taking care of business, a rider leaned in and asked me if I could make some adjustments to his bike.

After I did that, I went to take a shower. As I stood in a five-deep line to take an ice-cold shower, another rider brought his bike to me, and said, "Can you fix my bike while you are waiting?" After finishing that job, I skipped the shower and went straight to dinner. While I was eating my dinner, three other people asked me to make adjustments to their bikes. Then it started to rain.

I finished the repairs after most of the riders had gone to sleep, and fell into bed exhausted around midnight. At 6:30 a.m., yet another rider woke me up and asked me to help them with their bike. I did, and then I took down my tent. As I was carrying my stuff to the truck, another rider

came hurriedly up to me and told me that I had to go fix someone else's bike "right away." I put my tent away, was working on their bike, turned around, and watched the cook throw breakfast away because he assumed everyone had eaten. I rode in the truck that day, resting both mentally and physically.



Crossing the Equator.



Crossing into South Africa



*Todd McDonald,
League Program
Coordinator and
Tour d'Afrique
mechanic.*

Crossing the Equator

Just before the mid-way point, the ride crossed the equator. That day was a non-race day, and we were allowed to get to camp at our own speed so that people could spend as much time as they wanted to at the equator. For fun and a challenge, I rode with three of the strongest riders on the trip.

George, one of the riders, was incredibly type-A — even about having a day off. We left after everyone else, rode slowly to the equator and took some pictures. George — who finished the race in second place — started worrying about how late we were, and began picking up the pace. He maintained a “relaxing” pace that kept the rest of us at the very edge of our abilities. We talked George into a few tea stops, but those were short-lived before he would hurry us back onto our bikes.

I remember that day as one of the highlights of the trip because it was a great challenge to hold George’s wheel and ride with the big guns for the day. The pace was tough, but enjoyable, and the scenery was stunning. It was great to see the most serious rider of the trip

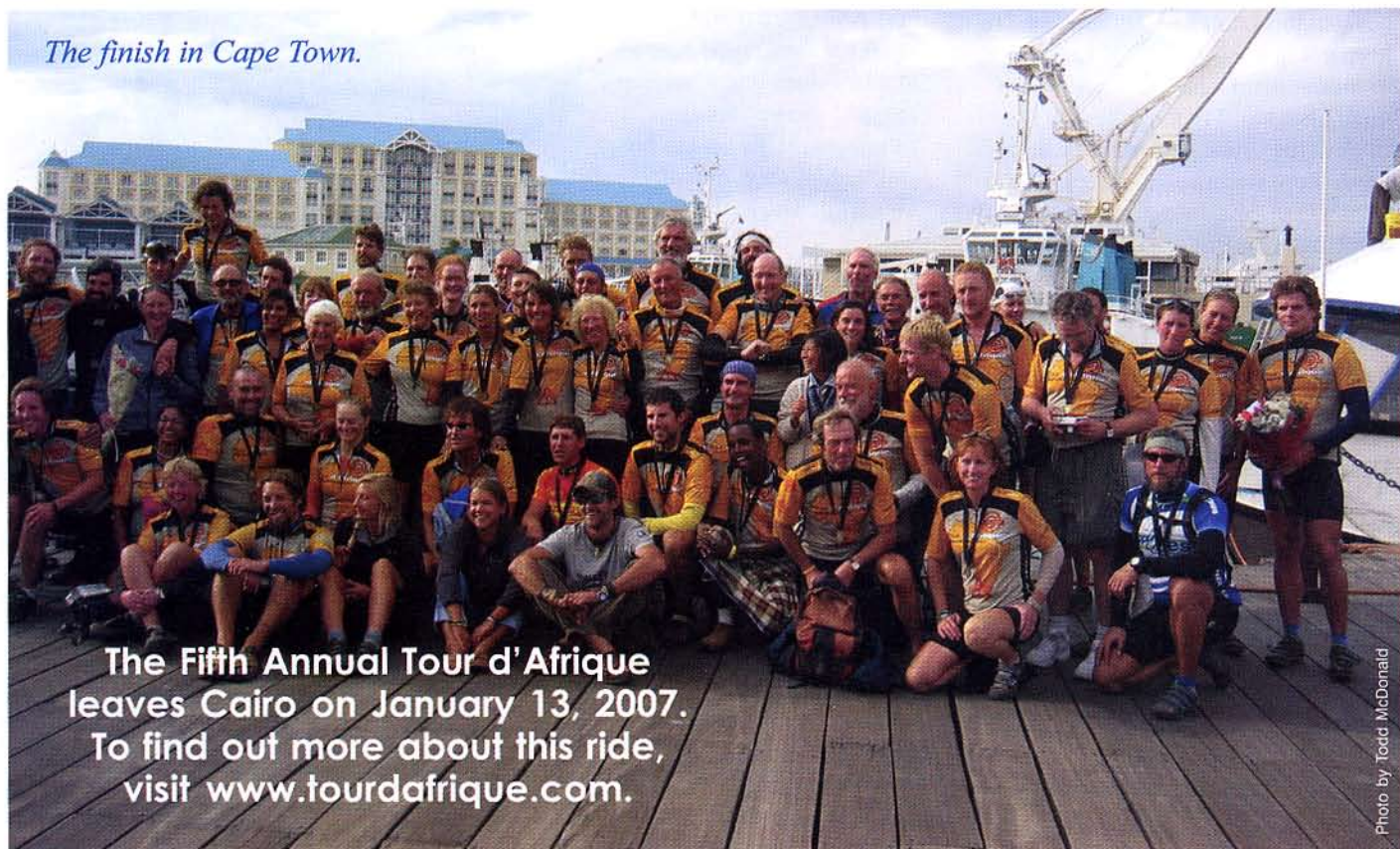
switch “off” for the day and relax — even if it was tough work for the rest of us.

Cape Town At Last

By South Africa, I was ready to cross the finish line. I missed my wife, and as much as I liked the group as a whole, 120 days was just about enough. Riding my bike and working with the riders and staff on Tour d’Afrique allowed me to take a very honest assessment of myself. It proved that in some ways I am not as strong as I thought, and that mentally I am stronger than I ever imagined.

More concretely, I also learned that each country in Africa is unique. Before the trip, I tended to think of countries in Africa like states in the U.S., with each country blending into the other. On the trip it became very clear how every country, big or small, is completely different from its neighbor. If I could find a way to do trips like this all the time, while taking my life — and most importantly, my wife — with me, I would do it again in a heartbeat. It was an unforgettable experience. ●

The finish in Cape Town.



**The Fifth Annual Tour d'Afrique
leaves Cairo on January 13, 2007.
To find out more about this ride,
visit www.tourdafrique.com.**

Photo by Todd McDonald